

NEW YORK TIMES
10 April 1987

ABROAD AT HOME

Anthony Lewis

While Zealots Slept

For six years President Reagan and his Administration have carried on an obsessive campaign for secrecy in government, trying to keep information from the press and the American public. Meanwhile, real secrets — intelligence secrets — were pouring out to the Soviet Union in a flood.

That is the wonderful irony in the Russian spy scare that now grips Washington. The zealots who thought up new ways to keep Administration policies secret, hounding suspected leakers and threatening the press, sat by in seeming indifference or incompetence as espionage reached record levels.

The penetration of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow is the latest in a series of humiliating American security failures. Over the last three years this country has seen 26 espionage convictions.

Edward Lee Howard worked for the C.I.A., handling critical material about operations in the Soviet Union. The agency put him in that job despite indications that he was a heavy drinker and might be using drugs.

Finally Mr. Howard was fired — instead of being eased into a non-sensitive post, a step less likely to arouse resentment. When he said he had contemplated going to the Soviet Embassy, the C.I.A. did not pass that alarming fact on to the F.B.I. for nearly a year. Nor, after he was fired, did the agency recover his regular passport or a phony one it had given him. The F.B.I. had just one man watching his home in New Mexico when he slipped away. He surfaced in Moscow on Aug. 7, 1986.

Mr. Howard is believed to have betrayed the C.I.A.'s ways of reaching its "assets" in the U.S.S.R. At least one such source was executed after Mr. Howard's flight. "He wiped out Moscow station," an intelligence official said.

Some of Washington's current indignation at Soviet tactics has to be taken with a good deal of salt. Bugs in our new embassy building in Moscow? We tried to plant bugs in the new Soviet Embassy in Washington. And we used to preen ourselves on overhearing conversations among Kremlin leaders in their cars.

But the Howard case shows there have been genuine blows to our security. Other examples include spies in the U.S. military and even in the super-secret National Security Agency, which intercepts communications around the world.

The problems did not start in the Reagan years. Concerns about the present and future U.S. Embassy buildings in Moscow, for instance, go back a long time. But urgent warnings to the Reagan Administration produced no effective action.

Mr. Reagan, his Attorneys General and his White House staff were busy, instead, trying to close down legitimate sources of information to the American public.

The Administration told officials to respond less generously to requests under the Freedom of Information Act. It tightened classification rules to let bureaucrats keep more documents secret longer. Mr. Reagan tried something more far-reaching in 1983, until Congress made him back off: an executive order to impose lifetime censorship on more than 120,000 officials so they would have to clear books and articles even after leaving the Government.

Officials also worked zealously to enforce censorship of the one American on whom the Supreme Court has imposed, for life, a system of prior restraint. He is Frank Snepp, a former C.I.A. official who angered the agency by publishing a book on the last days in Vietnam without submitting it for clearance as he had promised to do. The Court, in addition to enjoining Mr. Snepp for life, turned his gross earnings from the book over to the Government — about \$180,000 so far.

When Frank Snepp makes a speech, he has to submit a text to C.I.A. censors first. When he wrote a book review for The Los Angeles Times, he had to show it to the agency before he sent it to the newspaper, and when the editor asked for a change, he had to show that to the censors, too.

That is how officials defend our security: by censoring the comments of Frank Snepp, a patriot who wrote his book to deplore U.S. abandonment of our friends in South Vietnam. And by trying to stop leaks, most of which tell the public about policy debates on which we should be informed.

To preserve essential security, Justice Potter Stewart wrote, we must avoid "secrecy for its own sake" — because when too many things are made secret, nothing is. It is time to stop trying to keep policy criticism from reaching the public — time to focus on protecting the real secrets. □